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ABSTRACT

To determine the technical writing needs of employers in the Greensboro (North Carolina) area, a questionnaire was sent to 262 members of the Chambers of Commerce in the region that employed 100 or more people. The response rate was 30%. Responses showed manufacturing to be the predominant industry in the area. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents indicated that letter and memorandum writing occurred at their companies, with the remaining one-third indicating their companies required the writing of bids and proposals, annual reports, informal notes, minutes of meetings, and manuals. Responses to other questions showed that most of the companies depended on their regular staff members to do their own writing; that most companies did not have enough writing to justify hiring somebody to do it or that their regular staff members would prefer to do their own writing. When asked what kinds of writing a technical writer would have to do at a given company, the most common response was "reports that had been 'roughed out' by other people," followed closely by "reports for which they would do some of the necessary research." Questions concerning the educational background of a technical writer indicated a wide range of qualifications. The opinion seemed to be that technical writing is a skill used to augment other skills, not a separate skill. (HOD)

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Survey of Technical Report Writing Needs in the Greensboro, NC Area

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Needs assessment plans can be considered to meet two goals:

1. To meet existing objectives that are not being met
2. To use existing opportunities that are not being used.

In conducting a needs assessment survey, one also needs to accept the realistic knowledge that the survey may show:

1. That existing programs do not meet the goals they were designed to meet.
2. That there is not an existing opportunity for the graduates of some programs.

A good needs assessment program, then,will provide data for decisions on continuing, expanding, contracting, eliminating, or establishing programs. There should be a concerted attempt to assess community, student, and employer needs. Concurrently, an attempt should be made to assess community, employer, and institutional resources.

Based on these theoretical assumptions, I conducted an informal survey of the technical writing needs and resources of the Greensboro, N.C. area. My initial interest in this subject was based on my ten years' teaching of the subject, with a broad base of student and non-English-faculty opinion that the course did not meet an existing employment need. In other words, students from a wide range of technical curricula had indicated, and had said that their major-curriculum instructors also indicated, that technical report writing was not needed on the jobs that they would be filling. My intuition told me otherwise, but I needed some data to support me. I recognized

that the data might not go my way, but I embarked on the project anyway, prepared to end up with one of at least three proposals:

1. To continue status quo, one technical report writing course required of most Associate Degree recipients;

2. To enhance technical report writing to the level of a curriculum;

3. To cancel technical report writing, or make it an elective.

A trip to the 1981 CCCC (Conference on College Composition and Communication) of the National Council of Teachers of English gave me information to buttress my cause: There are 24 colleges and universities offering degrees (graduate and undergraduate) in technical writing, and none of these is located in the South. Discussion at the CCCC indicated that there is a nation-wide interest in corporate hiring of skillful technical writers, and that high salaries are available for those hired. I decided to let my survey help me find out if this were also the case in the Greensboro area.

In selecting my audience, I got a copy of the Guilford County pages of a North Carolina Georgraphic Guide from the Development Officer of Guilford Technical Institute. I determined, by combining this information with that found in Chamber of Commerce records, that only 48 Chamber members in Greensboro hire over 100 employees, so I decided to widen my audience. I included all of Guilford County, and there were a total of 262 questionnaires sent out to members of the Chambers of Commerce in Guilford County which

employed 100 or more people. I directed each questionnaire to the chief executive officer listed in the North Carolina Geographic Guide to business and industry. There were a total of 78 responses before any follow-up calls were made. Because this 30% response rate is considered good in a survey of top executives in business and industry, I made the decision to proceed with the tabulation without making follow-up calls. The tabulated results are attached to this discussion.

By far, the predominant response to the first question, "What kind of business of industry is your company?" was "Manufacturing." This was not surprising, considering the economy of the NC Piedmont.

Question #2, "What kinds of writing occur at your company?" yielded some interesting results. Approximately two-thirds of the responding questionnaires indicated that letter and memorandum writing occurred at their companies. Approximately one-third of the responding companies indicated that their companies needed the writing of bids and proposals, annual reports, informal notes, minutes of meetings, and manuals. Approximately one-fourth of the companies indicated that they needed feasibility studies written, with approximately one-fifth mentioning reports of research and technical papers.

The exciting thing about the answers to question #2 was that I tailored my list to the types of writing taught in a standard

technical report writing course. It is strongly supportive of a technical writing requirement that every response received indicated a need for at least one of the types of writing taught in these courses. There was no questionnaire filled out that indicated no need for the types of writing that I included in my list of choices. A further endorsement of a required technical writing course in technical curricula, if one be needed, is the answer to question #3.

Question #3 asks, "Do you hire personnel just for the task of doing some of this writing?" 85% of the companies who answered this question indicated that they depended on their regular staff members for doing their own writing. In fact, some indicated this rather strongly in the comment section by remarks such as "We expect our employees to be able to perform their job [sic] even if it involves writing." A more complete analysis of the responses to this question, of course, would tend to yield the projection that it would not be feasible to institute a technical writing curriculum in the Greensboro area.

Question #4, which was designed to determine the reasons a technical writer was not employed by the company, elicited more responses than question #3. This question also supports a strong need for employees to be able to do their own writing. The first and second choices received 86% of the responses. These choices were:

1. There is not enough writing to justify hiring somebody to do it.

2. My regular staff members would prefer to do their own writing.

As question #3, this response tends to add further support to the prediction that a technical report writing curriculum in this area would not find strong support in the job market for students. What could be claimed, however, is that a technical writing option in addition to a technical major, would lend support to the persuasiveness of a job seekers package of credentials, since so many jobs in this area require technical candidates to have exceptional communication skills in addition to their technical expertise.

Question #5, "If you do hire somebody to do this kind of writing, what are his/her qualifications?" indicated a wide range of qualifications for technical writers in the working world. The interesting point was that only one response specified a requirement of a degree in technical writing. The combined opinion seemed to be that technical writing is a skill used to augment other skills, not a separate skill by itself. Question #7 further clarifies the response to question #5. When asked, "If you were going to hire a technical writer, what qualifications would best qualify this person?" twelve responses were tabulated in areas that indicated this aspect of technical report writing as an auxiliary skill to some other technical or engineering specialty. Ten responses specified an English degree with a concentration in technical writing. It should be noted that many respondents who had indicated earlier that they did not hire a technical writer had ceased filling out the questions by this point.

Question #9, which inquired about what kinds of writing a technical writer would have to do at a given company, demonstrated a strong need for a technical writer to be able to interact with other professionals. The predominant response was "Reports which had been 'roughed out' by other people," followed closely by "Reports for which they would do some of the necessary research." This kind of linking relationship between a technical writer and the other areas may well contradict earlier responses that indicated that technical reports were largely done by the specific employee himself or herself rather than being turned over to a technical writer, but it is important to note that the responses had diminished to 38 by this point.

Because research done by Thomas Pearsall and presented at the CCCC in 1981 indicates that there are many colleges and universities across the nation which are newly offering concentrations and minors in technical writing, in addition to the twenty-four that offer bona fide degrees, I still tend to believe that there is a need for such a program, concentration, or minor in the Piedmont Triad. What my research may have done is show me that there is a greater need for awareness on the part of employers of the specific training and skills acquired in a technical writing program. I very strongly suspect that in the South the people who are hired as technical writers are under-employed professionals from other areas who cannot find jobs. Data at Western Electric, which hires 500+ technical

writers, tends to substantiate this theory. Many employees currently effectively serving as technical writers may have peripherally related degrees such as English or communications. A course in technical writing that I piloted at UNC-G this past spring had a good enrollment and low attrition, and was very popular for the communications majors as a required elective.

I plan to augment this survey with a separate assessment of all communications needs, which I will conduct this summer. I have been granted permission to again survey the local community to determine communications needs for new courses in the English and communications department if Guilford Technical Institute is able to become a community college. I will attempt in this second survey to learn about needs in all areas of communication, and I intend to probe particularly to determine whether there is a need for a course in Group Communications and Managerial Communications, two courses which we are currently cancelling because they did not carry a COM prefix, and under community colleges regulations, therefore, we do not have anyone qualified to teach them.

If I were criticizing my own technical writing survey, I would make the following changes:

1. I would follow up with phone calls and attempt to elicit omitted responses.
2. I would attempt to use some standardized code for the industry types in question #1.
3. I would attempt to adopt a more educative approach in the cover letter.

3. Do you hire personnel just for the task of doing some or all of this writing?

6 Yes, full-time
2 Yes, part-time
1 No, free lancers are used as the need develops
50 No, this writing is done by other members of our regular staff.

4. If you do not hire somebody to do this kind of writing, can you identify the reason?

32 There is not enough writing to justify hiring somebody to do it.
23 My regular staff members would prefer to do their own writing.
4 I cannot afford to hire a technical writer.
1 None of the technical writers I have tried has been able to do the job.
4 Other: Technical writing originates from company headquarters.
Would take too much time in training.
Have no need for writers other than normal usage.
Most writing requires specialty skill - e.g. accounting
We expect our employees to be able to perform their jobs even if it involves writing.
Writing would be done by the person preparing the report.
No need for a technical writer.

5. If you do hire somebody to do this kind of writing, what are his/her qualifications?

1 Engineering degree in the area of my company's specialty
6 English degree plus training in the area of my company's specialty
1 Technical (Associate) degree in the area of my company's specialty plus skill in writing
4 Two or more years of college plus an understanding in my company's specialty
1 A degree in technical writing
5 A degree in creative writing
5 Other: Degree in journalism
BA degree
General Secretary
Communications, journalism.

6. If your technical writer has a degree in technical writing, where was it earned?

No responses

7. If you were going to hire a technical writer (perhaps in addition to one or more you may already have), what qualifications would you say would best qualify this person?

3 A degree in engineering with a technical writing option.
8 A degree from a technical school (Associate degree) with a technical writing option and an area of expertise that was consistent with your company's needs.
10 An English degree with a concentration in technical writing.
1 An engineering degree with a graduate degree in technical writing.

8. What salary would you be willing to pay a technical writer?

5 Under 14,000
12 14,000-18,000
1 18,000-22,000
3 22,000-30,000

9. If you were going to hire a technical writer, which of the following kinds of writing would you want done by this person?

14 Reports which had been "roughed out" by other people
11 Reports for which they would do some of the necessary research
9 Reports which would be handled completely by the technical writer
4 Other: Romance and descriptive retail copywriting
Marketing, speech writing, grants and proposals
EEO Reports, employer benefits booklet, personnel reports
All the above and more.

10. If your technical report writer engages in any activities besides writing technical reports, please indicate what percentage of the total time is spent on the following activities.

8	Consulting with management	(23.1%)
3	Typing	(11.7%)
4	Writing speeches	(11.3%)
7	Rewriting	(14.6%)
4	Meeting with the press	(11.8%)
3	Making public appearances	(6.7%)
2	Programming/operating a computer	(12.5%)
4	Filing/recording data	(11.3%)
7	Researching in company files	(19.3%)
7	Consulting with other companies	(8.9%)
3	Operating duplicating equipment	(5.3%)

11. How many of your technical writers have been promoted to their present jobs from previous positions?

Total of seven reported from three companies.

12. From what positions were they promoted?

1 Secretary
1 Teacher

13. How many of your technical writers have been promoted to other positions?

Three promotions reported

14. To what positions have they been promoted?

1 Manager
1 Analyst
1 Marketing Specialist

15. Please indicate the approximate ages of your technical writers.

0 Under 25
0 25-30
5 30-35
6 35-40
3 40-50
3 Over 50

Number of companies responding that their companies did not do any technical writing, and that they therefore did not fill out the questionnaire: 15

Number of companies responding to the questionnaire with at least partial answers: 60

Number of companies not responding to the questionnaire at all: 90

Number of companies responding too late for response to be tabulated: 3